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Hitting the untapped international tourist market

By CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

It is the third-largest retailing operation in the nation with approximately five million employees. In New England it generates more than \$620 million of state and local taxes annually. And in Rhode Island in 1986, it is estimated that \$800 million was spent in this "invisible industry."

As one of the top five industries in each of the New England states, the tourist business is little appreciated and less understood by the many whose jobs in food, entertainment, lodging and transportation are dependent on it. And in "Little Rhody" to the "Biggest Little State in the Union" to the current "America's First Resort," the state has tried to project an image to the prospective tourist that will attract him or her to Rhode Island.

We have come a long way at selling ourselves as an attractive place to visit. Four years ago our Providence Convention Bureau would plug us as "the best kept secret in New England," and we were, while this last year Newport became the most desired city in the region to visit.

Sen. Claiborne Pell has recognized the potential of an expanded tourist industry and initiated a meeting of interested persons and agencies to discuss the issue. Gov. Edward D. DiPrete, who last fall co-hosted a Newport conference attended by approximately 100 professionals interested in a virtually untapped market—the international tourist, has also seen the potential for expansion.

The United States' share of international visitor arrivals is 7 percent and receipts approach 12 percent, but for a country of this size, beauty, variety and significance, these numbers should be considerably higher. The US Travel and Tourism Administration (USTTA), a division of the Department of Commerce, is aware of this and has conducted studies of the international visitor that it presented at the meeting, together with recommendations that might be used in Rhode Island.

The USTTA estimates that 22 million international visitors found their way to this country's shores in

1986, with one-half of that number coming from Canada. Figures for 1984, the latest year for which detailed data are available, indicate that more than two million of these Canadians came to New England. The 32,000 Canadians visiting Rhode Island represent only 1.5 percent of all Canadians visiting New England and are the largest single group of foreign tourists to the state. But is there a bigger market in Rhode Island for these and other foreign visitors?

Our recommendation to the USTTA is that marketing for international visitors should be targeted toward a few selected countries rather than scattered throughout the world. In addition to Canada, they suggest the United Kingdom, West Germany, France and Japan for potential markets since all send relatively large numbers of visitors and are our leading sources of tourists to New England.

If there is a hope to get more foreign visitors to come to Rhode Island (the loss by America II in the America's Cup races in Australia may rule out Newport as a major international yachting attraction next year), then considerable efforts must be made by the state to bring foreign tourists here, because it does not just happen. It has to be marketed, and it costs money.

Tourism is a growth industry, and in Rhode Island, according to a University of Rhode Island survey, our 14 percent annual growth rate puts us ahead of all of the other New England states. Given that the state spent only \$625,000 in 1985-86 to promote tourism, with 1.6 percent of that allocated for the foreign market, we have done well. But the international tourist is a growing market that still remains to be tapped by this small state. How to do it?

Recognizing the small size of the state, low level of visibility and limited financial resources, it would make sense to work with all of the rest of New England to make up a package of attractions that will bring foreign visitors, first, to the region and, second, to Rhode Island. This is the principal recommendation for a marketing strategy made by the USTTA—cooperate with other states and agencies

within New England in promotion, marketing, distributing literature and developing mutual relationships.

The Department of Economic Development, our state tourism arm, has taken this to heart, and its representatives recently shared a New England booth at a tourism trade show in London. This makes sense because several larger states had their own booths (21 states of this country are larger than all of New England), and by marketing our larger and more varied New England region we have a better opportunity to get the foreign visitor to Rhode Island.

Other strategies included adopting a country so that close ties could be established between ourselves and a foreign nation. This has been an effective measure in South Carolina where 30,000 Germans now visit the state annually. Better regional maps, better signage, more inns, pre-packaged tours and other ideas were also suggested.

Foreign visitors would greatly appreciate our state, not only for its physical beauty but also for its varied ethnic diversity, from native American to recent Asian arrivals. The more-than-twenty recognized ethnic groups in the state could be incorporated into a marketing strategy to match them with foreign visitors who share common languages and cultures.

There is little question that this small state in the New England region has much to offer the foreign visitor, and we can generate more jobs and taxes by increasing the number of international tourists in addition to others that come, but it requires a cooperation among many groups in New England. Historically, we have not done this in our state with much enthusiasm, if at all. But the market and dollars are there if we would place greater energy and resources to the task. The Pell-, DiPrete- and Department of Economic Development-sponsored meeting in Newport was a cornucopia of ideas; now it remains to be seen if we will do anything with them.

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